

12/04/10: Caney Creek Canyon & Kinlock Falls, Bankhead National Forest, AL

A cooperative outing of Wild South and Fresh Air Family, this hike was my third trip to Caney Creek Falls, my first to the Lower Falls, and my friend Tim's first real taste of Bankhead and the true beauty it has to offer. In the end, it did not disappoint.

At first, Tim seemed relatively unimpressed as most would be by the dirt road we were wandering down for a mile or so, a mixture of hardwoods, pines and a scrubby clear cut area on a small section of private land we had to cross. Not far after though, the descent into the canyon gave way to a completely different landscape. As I figured, the hike at Indian Tomb Hollow gave off the wrong impression of what the Bankhead National Forest holds. We didn't see any of the towering bluffs, waterfalls and Hemlock laden microclimates that make this area so unique. Tim's look of disbelief and awe as we wandered down into the canyon was enough to make me smile; he finally understood why it is I come to this place time after time.

After peering briefly off the side of the bluff, we made our way down along the rock face, the roar of a recent rain fueled Upper Caney Creek Falls ringing in our ears. We spent probably half an hour here, photographing it from every angle allowable, rock hopping the creek for most photos of it and it's smaller sister falls joining in on the right. My first trip here years ago was in the summer, which provided a sand bar on the right side that now was totally covered in water. A small price to pay for such beauty, though. From here we set out down the canyon, the bluff on the opposite side reaching 40-50ft, it's geology well exposed in layers. To our left the bluff was undercut from what would be an incredible flood level to see this falls at, and provided a narrow and rather long shelter for a while.

As the embankment got higher on our side of the trail one of the group members slid down almost into the water itself. I offered a hand to pull him back up, but he waved me off and then I saw why: he'd sliced open two of his fingers on a rock or tree limb on the way down and was bleeding pretty bad, one of which probably could have used stitches. I called up to Kim, one of the leads from Fresh Air Family, who dressed the wounds, and I jogged ahead some to alert Janice from Wild South of the situation. He stayed in good spirits throughout and really downplayed the whole thing, intent on not letting it ruin the day. After breaking for a little while next to a solid rock bottom feeder creek that ended with a small cascade at the end, we crossed as best we could with the dog we'd met earlier happily tagging along with us. We crossed again soon after, with a large rock outcropping on our right that'd been heavily uncut. Here we saw some wildlife, a salamander and a group of minnows swimming in the cool green water. We made yet another crossing, avoiding a large logjam, and saw yet another picturesque feeder stream coming in to join Caney Creek. There is no denying the bountiful beauty you can find out here if you're carefree enough to just wander along to see what you find.

We crossed once more, and the sound of water rushing was again becoming louder as we neared Lower Caney Creek Falls. After a brief photo-op at a unique overlook down literally on top of the falls itself, we rounded the crescent shaped canyon on the right hand side [there's no way down on the left!]. I slipped off and shot a photo or two of the feeder creek's upper falls, approximately 10-15ft high while everyone else stared in awe of height of the walls and view down into the green plunge pool. My

adventurousness getting the best of me, as usual, I followed a little ledge down and one footed a jump to the ground about 6-7ft below, much to my knee's disapproval. The "whump" I then heard behind me was Tim following suit. I winced and then advised the rest not to come this route. They ended up having to hike further downstream for a way down, which was our way back up, leaving the lower falls area completely to myself and Tim to take a crazy spree of people-less photos for about 10-15 minutes. I rested some, having been up since 3am dealing with a serious headache, never enough to deter me from hiking though, and ate a late lunch and people watched as the others showed up and began their flurry of photographs.

After an extended stay here, we continued downstream, and I found the first of three geocaches I'd set out to see this day as well. This one had some unique items, including something we probably should have gotten rid of, but we left it for someone else to snicker at. The canyon here opened up, with a mature Hemlock forest sandwiched between a very steep hillside to the right and yet more towering bluffs right against the water on the right. We found an abandoned campsite, complete with tarp, camp stove canisters and a lot of assorted gear perhaps stashed here for later. To get out of the canyon, most people used the available rope to shimmy up the hill, and I followed suit, just because it was fun, though not necessary.

We retraced our steps, taking more photographs of the falls from above as well passed, and ran into a group of geocachers who had just found and put back the second cache I was after. I left more of my trademark plastic army men here, took a dinky keychain, and continued on with the group after explaining to a few what exactly I was doing. The geocache group went on ahead, having missed the third geocache on the way in, technically the first one would come across on the trip in, but I purposely saved it for last it being off trail. We ended up in a collaborative effort in finding the third, "BrushyPines" sweeping some leaves away from a rock and then me spotting the cache hidden low in between them.

Back at the parking area, most of us parted way, but I offered to take two others, one of whom I'd met online at the Alatrails website on up to see Kinlock Falls, as we had some daylight left and they'd come from Mobile to see the area. I took them in the scenic route, above the falls first, mentioned the grist mill, and then on down to the overlook, and eventually the creek bottom. After a brief side trip on my part solo to see Kinlock Chute Falls, we all headed back to the car and parted ways ourselves.